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State Department Flies Blind in Iran

The United States is still harvesting the bitter fruit of its dependence on the shah of Iran before his 1979 overthrow.

Having failed to cultivate contacts in the ranks of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Islamic revolution, U.S. intelligence has been flying blind in Iran for six years.

An almost comical illustration of this ignorance is the State Department's latest efforts to discover whether the 85-year-old mullah is dying. An accurate answer is obviously important to any plans for dealing with post-Khomeini Iran and its impact on the Persian Gulf region.

But the State Department's experts on Iran aren't obtaining reliable information on which to base their advice to the president's policy makers.

They have just received two reports on the state of Khomeini's health from two sources considered equally dependable—and the reports are contradictory.

One report says that Khomeini is in the pink. The other says he's on his deathbed.

When asked for an evaluation of the conflicting reports, a State Department analyst gave my associate Lucette Lagnado an answer worthy of the Delphic oracle.

"My own feeling," he said wryly, "is that Khomeini is healthier than [Soviet President Konstantin] Chernenko."

Another source remarked with some exasperation that Khomeini "has been 'dying' for six years" and noted a recent flurry of rumors that the ayatollah has lapsed into a coma.

What makes the two reports particularly puzzling is that both apparently relied largely on the same evidence.

For example, the source who thinks Khomeini is on his last legs emphasized his failure to make a personal appearance on the sixth anniversary of the Iranian revolution earlier this month. The ayatollah's son read a lengthy speech in his father's name.

But a check of the files showed that Khomeini wasn't present for the celebration last year and has rarely, if ever, shown up for the event.

The Khomeini-is-dying source recited unverifiable rumors that Khomeini has prostate cancer and has had several heart attacks. The Khomeini-is-okay source cited equally unverifiable reports that the ayatollah hasn't had a heart attack in years.

Perhaps most infuriating of all, though, were the contradictory interpretations given to Khomeini's most recent appearance on television. One source said Khomeini looked terrible; his face was puffy and his movements were those of a decrepit old man.

The other source said Khomeini's face wasn't puffy, that he looked generally healthy and that he moved, if not like a spring chicken, at least like a reasonably fit old buzzard.

All of this leaves the State Department on the horns of a dilemma.

Should it find new sources in Iran? Or just buy them new television sets?